

THE NORDIC COUNTRIES IN YEAR 2000:

A vision of Alternative Ways of Life

By Johan Galtung  
Université Nouvelle Transnationale

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## 1. Ways of Life: An Overview

With whom do you do what, how, when and where - and why; that would be so more or less a definition of <sup>a</sup> way of life. It starts out with the social setting, then come the activities with specifications including time and space - and ends with the basic question, why, the whole ethos underlying the way of life. Without answers to these questions all exercises in the theory and practice of social change, construction and destruction, become rather futile. For what is the purpose of even the most perfect structure if the lives lived inside that perfect edifice are empty?

I think that is the basic dilemma of our times. There have always been rich and wealthy people around and only few of them have led lives that are real sources of inspiration to others. I am not thinking of the lofty ideals, of the highest levels of human development in terms of <sup>transpersonal</sup> union, sacred or secular, far beyond one's own little body, mind and soul. I am just thinking of one little but rather basic point: the capacity to be happy and spread some happiness, some basic sense of well-being, to others - at least to the nearest ones.

When the rich and wealthy did not exude happiness but even led miserable lives, like that recluse, the multi-billionaire Howard Hughes, there were <sup>always</sup> some explanations why liberation from the toil for survival did ~~not~~ liberate more positive human forces. One was the old religious one: that human beings are not good enough. Another that ~~elites~~ had already been destroyed in the struggle - but in that case their offspring should do better. Another, more socialist, was that the upper classes were ~~condemned~~ to spiritual and human misery anyhow, and that only the oppressed - the working classes, the non-whites, the tribals, the women - still had the human qualities that would make a difference. Given access to life in material dignity new man, el hombre nuevo, would arise. But socialist and social democratic changes took place, the welfare state came with

precisely that material dignity (and is now probably on its way out) and new man/woman looked very much like the old one. An enormous increase in quantity of materially comfortable living did not seem to affect the quality of human life that much. Except, that is, in a rather important negative sense: some basic worries had been engineered away, socially. Example: Nordic people seem to have less money in the bank and to consume more gladly because they feel relatively well protected against the inescapable calamities of illness and old age, not to mention the two of them at the same time. This is less the case with North Americans than with North Europeans, one possible reason why the crave for money is so much out in the open (and often leads to so many rather unsavoury practices) on the other side of the Atlantic.

Nonetheless, a basic fact is that we have never been so rich, and yet so poor. Look at our mass media with its predigested, chopped-up material for the eyes and the ears - an insult to the "masses" for whose consumption it is said to be produced and distributed. Look at the lack of spiritualism of any kind except in small, marginalized groups. Look at all the indicators of disintegration, from mental disorders, alcoholism and other forms of drug addiction, and suicide via homicide, assault and robbery and rape and other forms of criminality, to the enormity of the violence in internal and external wars. It is very hard to sustain any hypothesis to the effect that human beings have somehow become better, that economic and social development have brought in their wake human development.

The socialist, and particularly the social democratic mistake seems obvious and has been pointed out very often: there was no basic critique of the Western social formation, only of the limited access. Contemporary green, alternative, even anarchist critique tries to go deeper into the roots of the social formation itself, hoping to identify factors that may have a bearing on the problem. The list is long, and would - in the four spaces of

our existence, include such factors as:

- NATURE. ecological breakdowns, partly the cause and partly the effect  
space: of our lack of ~~concern~~ for nature, making co-existence, partnership, learning from nature more difficult. Increasingly I see "meatism", breeding animals to kill them and eat them, as a part of that syndrome.
- HUMAN an intense individualism, bent at short term maximization of  
space: individual utility combined with a materialism that sees the utility in material/somatic terms, as "satisfaction". It is assumed that others do the same, that individualism and not collectivism is the rule, even inside the family, among friends, in the home, at school, at work. Solidarity is out!
- SOCIAL careerism, in order to get into the higher reaches of society,  
space: to get ~~wealthy~~ (economy), powerful (polity), famous (culture); above all to get the money needed to satisfy individual, material goals. That this leads to conflicts is obvious.
- WORLD competition, conflict, war, each country trying to do at the  
space: world level what individuals do at the social level, maximizing national utility, defining that in economic, material terms as growth, capital accumulation and turn-over, market shares, etc. That this leads to conflicts is obvious.

Actually, this is the description of a way of life, not  
(1)  
only of social structures and processes. Elsewhere I have tried to capture that way of life in ~~the~~ formula BWL: bourgeois way of life, interpreting "bourgeois" not in the marxist sense but rather historically, as the people living inside the burg, the burghers. I have tried to see them in terms of four major characteristics:

Non-manual work - this is the careerism referred to above, away from anything that has to do with direct contact with nature

Material comfort - dampening all the fluctuations of nature, creating distance to nature and hence easily leading to ecological breakdowns

Privatism - withdrawal into family and peer groups. What is said above is stronger: withdrawal into oneself as one's own social universe, engaged in bargains with others

Security - trying to secure this existence against any kind of threat, at present seeing the nation state as the burg behind which security can be found provided the country is wealthy, strong and powerful.

The correspondence is obvious; they are taken out of the same social logic, the same social ethos. To break with BWL is in a very real sense to break with the Western social formation. As this is the formation within which we live, ~~To~~ live an alternative way of life, an AWL, is already to be a dissident - even to search for one is subversive activity, if one has a choice. That latter

point is rather important: it costs nothing, and constitutes no challenge, to live alternatively if the dominant way of life is closed for one reason or another (belonging to the "wrong" class, caste or group, etc.). A student AWL as transition to BWL later is only what is expected; it is what comes later that counts.

From what has been said so far it is obvious that an AWL has some basic themes on which variations can be made, ad infinitum. The main themes are, of course, to mix manual and non-manual work, to live closer to nature in a less artificial environment, to live more collectively in a setting of "mutual rights and obligations", and to generate <sup>more</sup> security in that setting, at a more direct, interpersonal level. The closeness to nature has to be sufficient to create more personal interest in avoiding ecological breakdowns simply by being more a part of the system, directly hit when something goes wrong. The collectivism has to be sufficient to generate a type of solidarity that makes one feel the suffering of others sufficiently to want to help. The general change in way of life would make careerism inside the present social formation look out of order, like an anachronism. Of course, one may play the role, even draw a salary, but skilfully avoid "top" positions (heads of ministries on the political or technical side, top manager of corporations, director of think tanks, ambassadorships etc.) letting one's body engage in ritual exercises within the system so as to leave the soul free to wander and wonder. The source of security would be near rather than remote and particularly not in pension funds subject to the ups and downs of the world money market and the fate of the nation state in which one happens to be born,

In this view of alternative ways of life there is a mix of two elements: a socio-political philosophy, or ideology to use a more direct expression, and a personal choice, an existential resolve, to start here and now, not to wait till the coming of the revolution, or the crisis, or what not. In this ambiguity there

are certain advantages for the "alternativists", and possibly for the society as a whole. As mentioned elsewhere, Nordic social cosmology both the dominant way of life and the alternative. (2)

First, social experiments take place within the social formation, using its liberal potential, sometimes stretching it beyond the limits of tolerance. That many such experiments in ways of life (more healthy nutrition habits, more relaxed ways of relating to others, particularly to people "high up", more relaxed ways of dressing, etc.) have caught on, been accepted, is not to be doubted.

Second, exactly because a choice is needed there is a certain self-selection, generally speaking meaning that those most motivated would be most likely to participate. Nobody is forced into an alternative way of life. By birth in the Western social formation one is launched into BWL, but with the possibility of opting out, at least to some extent, thanks to the level of liberalism found within that formation, at least in the Nordic countries.

Third, a society is emerging due to this <sup>ambiguity</sup> with a mixture of BWL and AWL. Not necessarily a bad society. People can spin their life-lines through both ~~life~~-styles and develop their own compromises. They can gamble on both horses, so to speak - maybe BWL for quantity (money, life expectancy) and AWL for quality (meaning, life experience). Society itself may be strengthened through this exercise in applied ecology: symbiotic diversity at work. Not only the individual who knows how to combine the two, but society becomes richer. The only to suffer are the purists, who want AWL to prevail totally and completely, into the deepest and innermost corners of society, and those who want BWL to keep its position of monopoly - except on the marginals, of course who by their very marginality prove the marginality of any AWL.

Conclusion: a highly dialectic situation. Which is good. Maybe we never had it, or will have it, so good.

2. An alternative way of life: A sketch.

I think the only honest approach to this theme is to be personal: what is my alternative, the one I have chosen, the alternative I would have liked to choose? At the age of 54 that becomes a little like reviewing one's own life, seeing the life-line and the branching points, the points where choices could have been made, and could have led to very different alternatives. But the reader will be spared such exercises in autobiographic egocentrism except in one sense: the reflections are based on personal experience and their validity may be very limited.

So, let me start with the why, the ethos, the reason for the whole exercise called a way of life, a way of living. I think the religious perspective is right: it must be human development, in harmony with nature. It cannot be social development or world development; they must be means rather than ends, conditions rather than the consequences of our activities. Actually, this is precisely what is so troublesome about such Western political ideologies as liberalism (blue), marxism (red) and anarchism (green): all these blueprints for perfect social structures tend to take on value in their own right as if the whole goal of life is to create the social and world edifice.

Let me be concrete. When one is young and trained in BWL one of the first things to learn is "postponement of gratification". First you have to do this, then comes the time for enjoyment. The desert is in the end, if at all. The young human being is given some years of irresponsible enjoyment as ~~childhood~~, then comes Education. Education is organized as a chain of schools, first primary, then secondary, then tertiary. All the time the message is the same: first you must have your exam 1, 2, 3 etc., then Life starts - -. But after all those exams comes Work which is also organized as a staircase with levels 1, 2, 3 - get your promotions, then Life starts - -. Quite soon the last phase comes, Retirement,

Presumably that is when Life really starts, towards the end, when Death is approaching.

A cruel system, that one, and I am not even sure it is an effective way of squeezing work out of people. Against this serial arrangement of Life in four phases, CEWR (using the initials of the four phases) I would strongly argue in favor of a more relaxed, more random model. Take a year or two of childhood, then some work, then some education, then a little retirement, then some work again, some childhood, some education - - Construct your own life series, mix the elements. It will probably not be good for your individual "career" in the BWL dominated society. But it may be very good for your own inner growth, with a lot of experience, letting the parts play together into patterns of your own construction, making you yourself and others less obviously predictable because the life series are so painfully similar.

Very concretely: start living now. This is not an argument against a good dose of education, but an argument against continuous, consecutive schooling, letting the schools come in the way of other forms of living. For this flexibility is needed, both at the individual and social levels. Generally that flexibility has to be created. In my own case I have found free lancing to be one answer. In economic terms it has the advantage of being paid for what one does, the market satisfaction of matching supply and demand, which I do not scorn. One is not paid a salary regardless of how one performs - for instance as a professor. The disadvantage is also clear: there is not only predictability but also security in that regular pay-slip - -

There is a social counterpart to this postponement of gratification idea: postponement till after the liberation/revolution. A friend of mine (ex-marxist) once said, recommending very strongly the movie "From Mao to Mozart": that is the kind of life



one should have after the revolution! Himself an accomplished amateur musician he felt this was Life, exploring the delights of sublime music, on string instruments. I agree, this is the kind of thing people should do, those who want to do so. Others might be concerned with the intricacies of theology/philosophy; for instance the deeper problems of buddhist thought, accessible to the human mind although highly intractable; of human capacity for self-improvement.. Still others might prefer mathematics: I remember myself as a student of mathematics, before the final exam, agreeing that some differential equations - great fun to solve, actually - could be enjoyed at the old age home, not now, Now is exam. Still others would prefer to create with their hands, objects, artefacts, art.

It is as if society, like individuals, needs a diploma before enjoyment can start - a clean bill of health, or whatever. A certificate of revolutionary excellence. To use a brutal example: it becomes like all these people I have met in my life who not only are dishonest but (a) know they are dishonest in the sense of concealing their true views and (b) consider this very smart, better be a conformist on the surface in order not to make trouble for yourself; and then, when you are through with Education, or when you are well launched in Work, then comes the great exercise of honesty to prove yourself and shock the world. Chances are that day never comes - the honesty was killed in process. Moral: honesty, like life, starts here and now - but to be honest does not mean to be inconsiderate.

And yet, at the same time, there are all those necessary conditions in the social and world spaces. And that is the whole purpose of the exercise in the preceding chapter: to create a social order that provides sufficient security. Meaning and happiness for oneself and one's surroundings have to be one's own creation. They are not incompatible with worries about security; but there is a limit. Worries about survival, individually or collectively, from starvation or nuclear war; worries about basic needs due to fluctuations in market conditions; worries about basic free-

doms because of mounting repression -- all of these singly--and particularly combined--cannot but interfere with the search for meaning and happiness. And yet, the struggle for a better society and a better world should come in addition to the struggle for those two, not prior to them, as a pre-condition.

But, one may object, could not meaning and happiness be found, even created, exactly in the struggle to set the social and world spaces right? No. This is the old problem so brilliantly analyzed by Koestler in The Yogi and the Commissar. The Commissar may succeed in making an edifice, but it is unfit for the Yogi to live. The Yogi may come very far in human growth, but at the expense of withdrawing from society, creating his own little hermitage, ultimately only with one inhabitant, himself. The Commissar does not develop the faculties for inner growth in his political work and the yogi not the <sup>capacity to</sup> change the social order --. Obviously the answer is some kind of both-and, which is the reason for recommending parallel activity. The question "where shall we start, changing ourselves or changing the world," is a false question. The answer is both.

But, another objection, would not a society guaranteeing security from the holocaust of nuclear war, and the silent holocaust of mass starvation and the gulag/KZ of massive repression become ultra-stable? Would not a certain nervousness, a sense of threat be a part of the challenge that drives us forward? That a threat is a challenge is certainly true; that threats drive us forward less so. Given a choice I would prefer the monasteries created by the <sup>green</sup> yogis to the superpower mastodons created by the blue and red commissars. But I do not think that is a choice we have to face, at least not in the Nordic countries. The social description given above <sup>(3)</sup> contains both blue, red and green elements in a mixture with which we simply have to experiment. Social and human "systems" are so complex that they defy theoretical explo-

rations with high levels of precision ( a good reason why I hesitate to be any more precise than I am here).

So, what does one do, how, where and when? Maybe we have much to learn from the monastic orders. The best ones were and are micro societies (except for not being biologically reproductive given norms of Celibacy), combining manual and nonmanual work, Time is split between what is necessary for survival, well-being and security and what is deemed sufficient, by that order, for inner human growth. Monasteries are compromises between the commissar who only goes in for the former and the yogi only going for the latter. One is amazed by their capacity to survive, not unchanged, but basically unmolested by the running of history. Of course, longevity is not an end in itself, but it is an indicator of some basic adequacy. Just think of how they matched scenic beauty with architectural and artistic estheticism! Take the Ajanta caves in Marashta state in India, Buddhist refuges in an increasingly hostile environment!

And yet we probably do not want to live in monasteries most of us, partly because we do not believe in celibacy, partly because we may not believe in that much isolation. So, relax the rules a little, or much. Make it easier to join and leave. Build on the element of self-reliance and the focus on human growth and the idea that time for essentials is now, not after the world has been set straight and right - meaning never. Create a commune, a neighborhood, a sense of community, even spread out in space - using the excellent telecommunication facilities of our age, even quite inexpensive at non-peak hours. Create networks, flexible, avoid heavy centralization, associate across all kinds of borders -- and there is even an answer to the with whom problem. Potentially with anybody who is pulling somehow in the same general direction. And they are very numerous, today, indeed. More than numerous enough to get started now. Anywhere. And both with inner growth and outer change.

N O T E S

- (1) "The Blue and the Red; the Green and the Brown: A Guide to Movements and Counter-movements", Friberg and Galtung, eds., Rörelserna, Akademilitteratur, Stockholm, 1984, pp. 376-412.
- (2) See "The Nordic Countries in a Historical and Global Context: A Bird's-eye View".
- (3) See "The Nordic Countries in Year 2000: A Vision of Self-reliance".